# ONE NATION ONE ELECTION: WEAKENING FEDERALISM AND UNDERMINING DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The recent proposal by the Union Government to implement "One Nation One Election" (ONOE) has precipitated a critical discourse regarding the constitutional integrity of India's electoral framework. Employing a doctrinal legal research methodology, this paper critically evaluates the ONOE proposal against the foundational tenets of federalism and democratic accountability. The study argues that while the rationale for ONOE rests on administrative efficiency and cost rationalization, its implementation threatens to dismantle India's "holding together" model of cooperative federalism by centralizing political power and marginalizing regional issues. The analysis highlights those simultaneous elections risk homogenizing diverse political identities and creating a "master cleavage" that overshadows local narratives, effectively rendering state elections as second-order events. Furthermore, the paper introduces a critical institutional dimension often absent from the discourse: the diminishing independence of the Election Commission of India (ECI). It posits that the legislative reversal of the Anoop Baranwal judgment regarding the appointment of Election Commissioners has created a structural vulnerability, rendering the ECI a potential "single point of failure" in a synchronized election model. Concluding that the administrative benefits do not outweigh the democratic deficits, the paper proposes structured policy alternatives, including state funding of elections and strict expenditure caps, to address financial concerns without compromising the nation's democratic fabric.*

**Keywords:** *One Nation One Election, Federalism, Democratic Accountability, Election Commission of India, Electoral Reform, Cooperative Federalism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION
### 1.1 The Current Electoral Framework of India

With nearly a billion voters India's electoral framework is a cornerstone of its democratic republic which has evolved to manage the world's largest electorate. It ensures universal suffrage and fair representation through constitutional

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provisions, an independent Election Commission of India (ECI),[1] and a structured electoral process. Elections in India, based on universal suffrage, are fought by multiple parties. India's electoral system, which follows the First Past The Post (FPTP) system, is rooted in the principles of British parliamentary democracy.[2] Under the current system, elections for the Union Parliament, different State Legislative Assemblies and the local bodies are held separately upon the expiration of the term of the respective body. As per the Indian Constitution, the tenure of the Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies and Local bodies is of a period of five years from the date of the first meeting of the House.[3] Thus, the elections are staggered throughout the calendar year as the term of different Houses expires at different point of times.

## 1.2. The Resurrection of a Synchronized Dream

In December 2024, the Indian political and democratic landscape witnessed a radical shift as the Union government tabled the Constitutional amendments[4] on the basis of the High-Level Committee Report for implementing One Nation One Election (hereinafter 'ONOE') in India.[5] This move, although termed as "dead on arrival"[6] by stalwart opposition leader like P. Chidambaram, has nevertheless put a juggernaut electoral reform into motion which in turn has sparked significant debates on its feasibility, utility and most importantly, on its effect on the federal and democratic principles of our Country. As of now, the Bill is being considered by a 39-member Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC).[7] In brief, The amendment seeks to fundamentally alter the electoral rhythm of the world's largest democracy by synchronizing the elections of the Lok Sabha (House of the People) with all State Legislative Assemblies and eventually the local bodies.[8] The concept of simultaneous elections is not novel to the Indian republic. For the first four general elections between 1950 and 1970 India had simultaneous elections for the Parliament and all the State Legislative Assemblies. But, to argue that

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[1]   Edited, "Commission & Omission" *The Indian Express*, 2021; Yogendra Yadav, "As CEC Rajiv Kumar Retires, His Legacy Casts a Dark Cloud" *The Indian Express*, 4 February 2025.

[2]   R. Ramesh, "Historical Perspectives of the Electoral Reforms in India" 72(Part II) *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 1325, 1325–36 (2011).

[3]   The Constitution of India, arts. 83, 172, 243E, 243U.

[4]   The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill 2024, LS Bill (2024-25).

[5]   High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, *Report on Simultaneous Elections in India* (14 March 2024).

[6]   P. Chidambaram, "Kovind Committee Report: Dead on Arrival" *The Indian Express*, 22 September 2024.

[7]   "39-Member JPC on 'One Nation, One Election' Bills Announced" *The Statesman*, 20 December 2024.

[8]   The Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024.

simultaneous elections are envisaged within the scheme of the Indian Constitution conflates correlation with causation.[9] The Constituent Assembly discussion on draft Article 289 of the Constitution, which corresponds to the present Article 324, itself militates against this conclusion. During the Constituent Assembly debates, Shibban Lal Saxena stated that owing to the passing of no confidence motions and subsequent dissolutions, all elections "will not synchronise"[10] and this is exactly what happened. Disruptions caused by pre-mature dissolution of Governments in several state in the late 1960s, along with the schism in Congress party and the rise of regional political forces, desynchronised the elections.

Simultaneous elections have also been proposed by several commissions in the past.[11] And now, this demand for ONOE has again found its voice in the arguments of the high cost of elections[12] and rigorous administrative workload. The renewed push for ONOE, championed for its promise of cost savings and governance efficiency, reignites a critical debate: can India synchronise its elections without undermining the principles of federalism and democratic accountability that define its constitutional ethos?

## 1.2 Rationale for Conducting Simultaneous Elections

As per the HLC report,[13] the rationale of ONOE lies in the broad objectives of enhancing the efficiency, effectiveness, and integrity of the electoral process.[14] Specifically, the Committee points out that holding separate elections for every representative institution involves substantial expenditure[15] in terms of manpower involvement,[16] infrastructure to be created and logistics to be arranged.

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9    NUJS Law Review, "Response Paper and Recommendations to the 2024 HLC Report on Simultaneous Elections" 49 *available at:* https://nujslawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/NUJSLR_Simultaneous-Elections-Report.pdf .

10   Constituent Assembly Debates on 15 June, 1949 *available at* https://www.constitutionofindia.net/debates/15-jun-1949/ (last visited on December 2, 2025).

11   Election Commission of India, "Annual Report 1982–83" (Election Commission of India 1983); cf Bibek Debroy and Kishore Desai, "Analysis of Simultaneous Elections: The 'What', 'Why' and 'How' (Discussion Paper)" (n 30); Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice, "79th Report on Feasibility of Holding Simultaneous Elections to the House of the People (Lok Sabha) and State Legislative Assemblies" (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2015).

12   Anjishnu Das, "What it Costs to Organise Lok Sabha Polls: EVMs to Security, Breaking Down the Numbers" *The Indian Express*, 17 December 2023.

13   *Supra* note 5.

14   *Supra* note 5 at 143.

15   Praveen Chakravarty, "The One-Election Idea is a Farce", *The Hindu*, December 5, 2017.

16   Shiv Sahay Singh, "Highest Deployment of Central Forces for Seventh Phase of Polling in West Bengal", *The Hindu*, May 31, 2024.

Implementing ONOE will rationalise such costs so that the funds can be diverted and utilised for actual developmental projects and initiatives. Primarily, the committee states that the sheer number of elections in any given year halts the real function of the Government i.e. development and securing well-being of its people as the Government is always in the 'election mode'.[17] The report also states that the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) prevents the incumbent Government from undertaking any development work.[18] Further, the Committee cites the issue of 'voter fatigue'.[19] However, an equally befitting reply to all these allegations has been given by *Jagdeep S. Chhokar.*[20] It is interesting to note that the mandate of the Committee was only to suggest the legislative and administrative framework for implementing simultaneous elections rather than examining its desirability beforehand. However, the Committee did discuss the desirability aspect as well.

## 1.3 The Institutional Crisis

Crucially, this paper introduces a vital dimension often missing from the ONOE discourse: the independence of the Election Commission of India (ECI). The feasibility of simultaneous elections rests on the presumption of a neutral arbiter. However, the recent allegations levelled against the Election Commission of India of being bias towards the ruling party at the centre and its failure to ensure a level-playing field to all the parties prior to every election has seriously made a dent on its credibility and independence. The allegations of systemic *"vote chori"* (vote theft)[21] levelled primarily by the Congress and supported by various political parties in the opposition has also contributed to ECI being perceived as biased. The alleged biasness of the ECI becomes more concerning when examined along with the Apex Court's watershed judgment in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India*[22] which aimed at insulating the ECI from the shackles of executive control and the lightning-fast reversal of this decision by the Union Government via the *Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023.*[23] A simultaneous election structure completely managed by the ECI which is perceived

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17     *Supra* note 5 at 147.
18     *Supra* note 5 at 149.
19     *Supra* note 5 at 153.
20     Jagdeep S Chhokar, "Simultaneous Elections: Striking at the Roots of Parliamentary Democracy" *The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy* 11–21, 2018.
21     Rahul Gandhi drops 'H files' to allege BJP 'stole' 2024 Haryana Assembly polls with ECI's help, *available at:* https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/rahul-gandhi-vote-theft-claims-haryana-elections-bjp-eci-nov-5-2025/article70243478.ece (last visited on 2 December 2025)
22     2023 SCC OnLine SC 216.
23     The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 (Act 49 of 2023).

as an extension of the Executive itself creates a structural vulnerability that could undermine the legitimacy of the entire electoral process.

This paper argues that ONOE risks centralising power, marginalising regional voices, and weakening the democratic fabric that has sustained India's diverse polity for over seven decades. The paper proceeds by outlining the research methodology, followed by an analysis of the federal and democratic principles enshrined in the Indian Constitution, the impact which the ONOE proposal may have on these fundamental principles, the institutional crisis which the ECI faces today and finally, offers structured policy alternatives that address the legitimate concerns of cost without dismantling the fundamental structure of Indian polity and its democratic principles.

## 1.4 Research Objectives and Methodology

This paper pursues the following **research objectives**:

1. To critically evaluate the "One Nation One Election" proposal against the constitutional tenets of **Federalism** and **Democratic Accountability**.

2. To analyse the impact of the declining institutional integrity and independence of the Election Commission of India and its implications for authorising the ECI to conduct simultaneous elections.

3. To propose **structured policy alternatives** to ONOE, drawing on recommendations from the Indrajit Gupta Committee and Law Commission reports, to address issues of expenditure and governance efficiency.

### Research Methodology

Given that the research problem is rooted in constitutional interpretation and institutional design, the doctrinal legal research methodology is the most appropriate framework which involves a systematic exposition, analysis, and critical evaluation of legal rules, principles, and doctrines. It allows for the synthesis of disparate legal sources like Constitutional provisions, statutes, case law, and parliamentary reports to construct a coherent normative argument regarding the validity of ONOE.

## 2. THE FLEXIBLE INDIAN FEDERALISM MODEL

India's Constitution is of a federal nature[24] (although, not strictly), of which the better-known examples are the USA, Canada and Australia. It establishes Government at two levels i.e. at the Central and at the State level. To elaborate further, the Indian federal structure was designed with a strong union to ensure national unity and stability, particularly in light of the subcontinent's diversity and recent partition.

But, the Constituent Assembly preferred the power-sharing model of Constitution in which the legislative, executive, judicial and fiscal powers have been distributed between different levels of Government.[25] The Assembly members were aware of the unique problems that the Indian republic faced at that nascent stage and therefore, the members drawing on experiences from great federations like United States, Switzerland, Australia, Canada etc. adopted a pick and choose policy. This gave birth to a new form of federalism to cater to India's needs.[26] It's a 'holding together' rather than a 'coming together' model of federalism.[27] This model embraced the idea of what scholars like *A.H. Birsch* and others have called "cooperative federalism".[28]

Although, the Indian federal structure practically gives more powers to the Union Government but being built upon the foundation of Cooperative federalism, it establishes a strong Central as well as robust State Governments. Indian federalism was never meant to be rigid. Rather, it was envisioned as a system of shared responsibilities that would encourage cooperation and collaboration between various levels of government.[29] This cooperative framework was intended to accommodate India's diversity while ensuring that states and the central government could work in tandem on common goals, such as economic development, social reform, and national security. India's federalism avoids the inherent drawbacks of a highly centralised Governance model because centralisation could have led to political instability by failing to address the

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24   Mahendra Pal Singh, "The Federal Scheme" in Sujit Choudhry, Madhav Khosla and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Indian Constitution* (OUP 2016) 452.

25   Mahendra Pal Singh, "The Federal Scheme" in Sujit Choudhry, Madhav Khosla and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Indian Constitution* (OUP 2016) 452.

26   Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* 231 (Oxford University Press 2019).

27   Alfred Stepan, "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the US Model" 10(4) *Journal of Democracy* 19 (1999).

28   *Supra* note 12.

29   Granville Austin, *Working a Democratic Constitution: A History of the Indian Experience* 215–16 (Oxford University Press 1999).

aspirations of different regions.[30] Indian federalism is structured in a manner so as to accommodate and celebrate regional diversity which is necessary to promote the democratic principle of representation and prevent marginalisation of several ethnic and linguistic groups across the country.[31] This balance between centralised and decentralised political structure enabled a more nuanced political system where local issues could be addressed by local governments, while national interests remained the responsibility of the central government.

The Constitution itself provides the field within which each of them can operate and exercise their legislative, administrative and financial powers. But, none of them can go beyond it.[32] It also implies that the states are supreme in the field allotted to them. Therefore, the Constitution intends for a strong Central Government but, this doesn't mean that States are somewhat secondary to the Union. They derive their legitimacy and authority from the Constitution itself and are not subject to Centre's will during ordinary times.[33]

## 3.  THE INDIAN DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORK

India's democratic framework, often celebrated as a global exemplar, stands as a testament to the nation's ability to sustain democratic governance since its independence in 1947. Described as the world's largest and one of its most enduring democracies, India has outlasted several historical counterparts, such as the French Third and Fourth Republics, the Weimar Republic, and early democratic experiments in Spain and Portugal, which succumbed to political instability or authoritarianism.[34] Being one of the world's largest and diverse countries, Indian democratic framework stands upon the foundation of decentralisation, representative governance, accountability and inclusivity, aiming to balance national unity with regional autonomy. This decentralisation of power ensures that governance can reach the lowest strata of the society so that the Government can work directly with the citizens and be held accountable for its actions. For example, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments[35] gave

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30    Louise Tillin, "Federalism and Democracy in Today's India" 53 *Economic and Political Weekly* 33 (2018).

31    Louise Tillin, *Remapping India: New States and Their Political Origins* (Oxford University Press 2013).

32    The Constitution of India, arts 245–255, sch. VII.

33     M P Jain, *Indian Constitutional Law* ch. 1.8, 9 (9th edn., LexisNexis 2025).

34    Meghnad Desai, "Equality or Inclusion: The Dilemma of India's Democracy" in Chandan Sengupta and Stuart Corbridge (eds), *Democracy, Development and Decentralisation in India: Counting Debates* 8 (Routledge 2010).

35    The Constitution (Seventy-third Amendment) Act, 1992 (India); The Constitution (Seventy-fourth Amendment) Act, 1992.

constitutional status to the local institutions of Panchayat and Municipalities which reinforced democratic accountability by involving local communities in the decision-making process.[36] The success of these amendments however, varies across states due to differing capacities and resources.

Further, India's representative democracy is built on the principle of inclusivity, ensuring that all sections of society have a voice in governance. Due to historic reasons the Indian democratic system incorporates provisions for accommodating as well as promoting diversity so that every section of the society can have some say in the decision-making process. For example, Article 330[37] which provides for reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the House of the People ensures that the historically marginalised communities are represented. This gives the minority communities a stake in the governance process, fostering a sense of belonging and participation, which is central to maintaining national unity. The Indian federalism structure promotes representative democracy in India by granting a significant autonomy to the States in order to enable the State to frame its policies as per the socio-economic circumstances prevailing in that state.

## 4.   FEDERALISM UNDER THREAT: POTENTIAL RISKS OF ONOE

Holding simultaneous elections without disrupting the federal framework would require a careful balancing act.[38] To give a context, it is pertinent to note that during the first 17 years of our republic, essentially it was only the Congress party which dominated the political landscape across the country[39] and therefore, the Union and the States were not at loggerheads with each other. However, today the situation is different. Regional parties have proliferated across the nation and are in power in a substantial number of states. Several parties in the opposition have made a strong protest against the implementation of ONOE for undermining the federal structure of India's polity and diminishing state's autonomy.[40]

The alleged advantages of ONOE must be weighed against its profound implications for India's federal structure. Federalism is a part of the basic structure of the Indian Constitution.[41] Federalism in India is not a matter of mere administrative convenience but is a constitutional principle which incorporates the

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36   *Supra* note 31 at 42.
37   The Constitution of India, art 330.
38   Ashutosh Kumar & Shruti Bedi, *"Electoral synchronicity: legal-constitutional challenges and implications for India's federal democracy"*, Asian Journal of Political Science (2025) *available at:* https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2025.2574569.
39   Norman D Palmer, "India's Fourth General Election" 7(5) *Asian Survey* 275–91 (1967).
40   "Simultaneous Polls Will Destroy Federalism: Opposition" *The Hindu*, 17 December 2023.
41   *Kesavananda Bharati v State of Kerala* (1973) 4 SCC 225.

idea of inclusivity of diverse linguistic, cultural, groups.[42] The idea of federalism cannot be viewed in isolation from the spirit and the intent of the Indian Constitution as a whole. The Indian Constitution aims to establish an egalitarian, inclusive and liberal democracy. Our federal design enables us to accommodate competing interests and identities, acknowledging diversity within democratic polity and thus, rendering competing interests complementary rather than conflicting.[43] Simultaneous elections will strangle the range of regional parties reflecting local ambitions and issues, therefore limiting the voice of individuals living at the periphery of the society. This will turn back the clock on deepening of the democratic process.[44]

It is submitted that ONOE's centralising tendencies risk undermining the autonomy of state governments, marginalising regional issues and tilting the balance of power toward the Union. The States are neither the agents of the Centre nor they exist at the will of the Centre. They are not mere administrative units, but are sovereign in their own field with the same Governing apparatus as the Union, and with an independent legislature and executive constituted by the same process as the Union, just at a smaller level.[45] P.B. Sawant, former Supreme Court judge also wrote that the constitution of legislative assemblies and formation of state governments are not subject to any authority of the Central Government. The Union government has no authority to meddle in the administration of a state unless and until there is a proclamation of Emergency as per the Constitution.[46]

Simultaneous elections will centralise political life and reverse the trend of last several decades which saw state politics as the preeminent arena of Indian politics.[47] Empirical evidence collected by several studies substantiates this claim.[48] This idea of inclusivity will not be realised until there are different forums of democratically elected bodies because the state governments are in a better

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[42]     "Drop the Bad Idea of Simultaneous Elections" *The Hindu*, 17 December 2023.

[43]     Aejaz Ahmad Wani and Rouf Ahmad Dar, "Simultaneous Elections in Plural Societies" *Economic and Political Weekly* 4, 45, 2024.

[44]     Association for Democratic Reforms, *Discussion on "Simultaneous Elections – Possibilities and Challenges* (2023).

[45]     *S R Bommai v Union of India* (1994) 3 SCC 1, 116.

[46]     Manoj C, "India's Lok Sabha Elections: Constitutionality and Voters' Choice to Keep the Polls Apart" *Indian Express*, 3 March 2018.

[47]     Louise Tillin, "Is Holding Simultaneous Elections for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies Necessarily a Good Idea" *Scroll.in*, 19 January 2017.

[48]     Aejaz Ahmad Wani and Rouf Ahmad Dar, "Simultaneous Elections in Plural Societies" *Economic and Political Weekly* 4, 45, 2024.

position to address the local issues.[49] There is also a high probability that conducting simultaneous elections will give more space to authoritarianism, favour national parties and their narratives that would, by nature of their national character, obtain more media attention than its State counterparts.[50] For example, the appeal of a Prime Minister may very well overshadow the performance of the local administration on the regional issues. Ultimately, the party in power in Delhi will benefit.[51]

Holding staggered elections actually strengthens federal design. With elections always imminent, the Government in Centre is also forced to (if not willing to) address the regional issues and design their narrative and manifesto accordingly.[52] In every election, depending upon the level of election, contesting parties run meticulously designed campaign specially curated after considering the national and local issues. India's federal framework ensures that state governments address local issues reflective of their unique socio-economic and cultural contexts. By conducting simultaneous elections, ONOE risks overshadowing these localised concerns with national narratives dominated by larger national parties. And thus, making state/regional elections 'second-order elections'.[53] This undermines the State's ability to chart their own political course independently.

Moreover, the takeover of local/regional issues by the national issues also impacts voter's behaviour.[54] In a leading empirical study on the relation between simultaneous elections and the voter turnout in the Indian context was done by *Csaba Nikolenyi* which after studying the Indian elections between 1971 and 2004 argued that conducting separate elections at the national and state level weakens the citizen's incentive to participate in the election process. The other aspect of it is that concurrent elections increase voter turnout.[55] This has been one of the prominent arguments made by proponents of introducing ONOE.

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[49]  Mahendra Pal Singh, "The Federal Scheme" in Sujit Choudhry, Madhav Khosla and Pratap Bhanu Mehta (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Indian Constitution* (OUP 2016)454-458.

[50]  Smita Gupta, "One Nation-One Poll and the Quest for Political Hegemony" *The Hindu Centre*, 5 March 2018.

[51]  Tarunabh Khaitan, "Killing a Constitution with a Thousand Cuts: Executive Aggrandizement and Party-State Fusion in India" 14(1) *Law and Ethics of Human Rights* 49, 63 (2020).

[52]  Triranjan Raj, "Prudence of Simultaneous Elections in India" 12 *Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry* (2019).

[53]  Arjan H Schakel and C Jeffery, "Are Regional Elections Really Second-Order?" 47(3) *Regional Studies* 324 (2013).

[54]  "State Assembly Elections: Nudging the Voter in One Direction" *The Hindu*, 2016.

[55]  C Nikolenyi, "Concurrent Elections and Voter Turnout: The Effect of the De-Linking of State Elections on Electoral Participation in India's Parliamentary Polls, 1971–2004" 58(1) *Political Studies* 214 (2010).

However, in another study it was found that synchronised elections, compared to closely timed but asynchronous elections, increase political parties' salience among voters, boosting straight ticket voting with a small increase in turnout. These effects result in a 21% higher probability of the same political party winning across tiers, without altering candidate composition. While synchronisation significantly influences state government formation, it does not affect development outcomes.[56] Moreover, in a study conducted in Italy to examine the voter behaviour between in the elections between 2004-2009 it was found that contrary to the general understanding that simultaneous elections will side-line the local issues, mayoral elections took prominence over the provincial elections, as far as influencing the vote behaviour is concerned.[57] However, the voters in Italy and India are not the same in the context of the society in which they live their lives. India's society is plagued by hero-worship and personality cult. In politics, *Soli Sorabjee* argues, is the path to degradation and will eventually lead to Dictatorship.[58] It's perfectly fine to view our leaders as heroic figures, but this admiration can lead to a dangerous tendency to hand them significant power and accept their actions without critical oversight whereas, the litmus test for any vibrant democracy is ensuring that their leaders are held accountable.[59] Even the leaders of new parties like Arvind Kejriwal who came to power while riding on an anti-incumbency wave has succumbed to hero-worship syndrome.[60]

Surprisingly, instead of addressing these concerns about federalism, the HLC report under the heading- 'Undermines Federalism'[61] just lists primarily concerns but at the end merely states that none of its recommendations for implementing simultaneous elections affect (much less infringe) the federal principle enshrined in our Constitution. There is no discussion at all in the Report.

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[56]    Vimal Balasubramaniam, Apurav Yash Bhatiya and Sabyasachi Das, "Synchronised Elections, Voter Behavior and Governance Outcomes: Evidence from India" *University of Warwick, Department of Economics, The Warwick Economics Research Paper Series (TWERPS)* 1276 (2020).

[57]    Emanuele Bracco and Federico Revelli, "Concurrent Elections and Political Accountability: Evidence from Italian Local Elections" 148 *Journal of Economic Behavior& Organization* 135 (2018).

[58]    For a general understanding of hero-worship in India *see*, Rahul Chaturvedi, Hariom Singh and Anita Singh, *Hero and Hero-Worship: Fandom in Modern India* (Vernon Press 2021).

[59]    Soli J Sorabjee, "Babasaheb's Warning: In Politics, Hero-Worship Is a Path to Degradation and Eventual Dictatorship" *The Indian Express*, 14 October 2019.

[60]    Hilal Ahmed, "Arvind Kejriwal and Hero Worship in Indian Politics" *The Indian Express*, 19 September 2024.

[61]    High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, *Report on Simultaneous Elections in India* 138 (14 March 2024).

## 5. DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE THREAT OF HOMOGENISATION

The members of the Constituent Assembly intended to establish a responsible, responsive and representative democracy.[62] On similar lines, the Apex Court has also held that the foundation of a responsible Government in a representative democracy is a 'Government by the people'.[63] Some contemporary democratic theorists explain 'Representative Government' as a "mix of aristocracy and democratic authorisation".[64] This implies balancing the principle of elite competence and mass participation. Therefore, elections become paramount for any vibrant democracy.[65] The Indian Electoral system is stated to stand upon the principles of fair representation, inclusivity and an equitable democracy.[66] However, there is some legitimate criticism as well.[67]

As far as 'responsible democracy' is concerned, the accountability in the Indian political structure is deeply rooted in the federal and decentralised nature of governance, in which originally it was envisaged that the citizens would engage with the representatives at multiple levels- local, state, and national. The framers sought to create a system where accountability could be localised, ensuring that governance addressed the distinct needs of each region.[68] A vibrant democracy must provide ample space and opportunities to its citizens for deliberation so that it can be held accountable by the public. Although, the preamble to the Indian Constitution starts with the resounding words (We, the people), the Indian citizens have limited control over their elected representatives. Be that as it may, frequent elections allow for more opportunities to the citizens to engage with their representatives in debates and discussions but conducting simultaneous elections will reduce whatever space is left for the Indian voters to participate effectively in the democratic process.[69]

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[62] *Sita Soren v Union of India* (2024) 3 SCR 462.

[63] *S R Chaudhuri v State of Punjab and Others* (2001) 7 SCC 126.

[64] Nadia Urbinati and Mark E Warren, "The Concept of Representation in Contemporary Democratic Theory" 11 *Annual Review of Political Science* 387 (2008).

[65] B Boundou and MC Haggrot, "Electoral Representation Revisited: Introduction" 26 *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 629 (2022).

[66] Raj Sekhar Vundru, "Which Electoral System Ensures Real Representation?" 5 *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies* 19 (2019).

[67] Sanjay Kumar, 'Is There a Crisis of Representation?' in Sanjay Kumar (ed), *Elections in India: An Overview* (Routledge 2022).

[68] Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (Oxford University Press 2019) 231.

[69] S Y Quraishi, "Holding LS, Assembly Polls Together is Desirable but Not Feasible" *The Quint*, 13 June 2016.

In a democratic form of Parliamentary government, like in India, the Executive is responsible to the Legislature. If at any time the Government fails to enjoy such confidence, it has to resign and call for new elections. It ensures transparency, responsiveness, and adherence to the electorate's mandate. ONOE is in conflict with this. ONOE guarantees a fixed term to the government in power till the next election cycle becomes due.[70] The rejection of Subash C Kashyap's recommendation of introducing Constructive vote of no confidence 'CVNC' by the High Level Committee effectively, gives birth to a dichotomic situation where if any House/Assembly gets dissolved before completing its term, this synchronised election cycle is broken and then we are again back to square one, because then either the term of the newly elected house will be truncated to the remainder of the unexpired term of the initially elected house or the state will have to be governed through President's rule till the next election cycle comes. And for obvious reasons, both of these solutions have their own problems. In the former, the argument of cost-saving and efficient governance falls on its face and, in the latter, it will give more power to the party ruling in the centre. This systemic dilution of checking mechanisms that liberal democratic constitutions usually install to ensure that the Executive is held responsible may lead to *Executive Aggrandizement.*[71] India is already considered to be on the trajectory of such a crisis.[72]

Another point which is pertinent to mention is that the objective of conducting simultaneous elections in Presidential Democracies is different. There the objective is to achieve congruence between the Executive and the Legislature which allows for a consistent policy framework for the entire country.[73] But, that is not desirable in a Parliamentary form of democratic Government, as the Legislature is required to hold the Executive accountable. And, parliamentary

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[70] Tarunabh Khaitan, "Killing a Constitution with a Thousand Cuts: Executive Aggrandizement and Party-State Fusion in India" 14(1) *Law and Ethics of Human Rights* 49, 62 (2020).

[71] Tarunabh Khaitan, "Executive Aggrandizement in Established Democracies: A Crisis of Liberal Democratic Constitutionalism" 17(1) *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 342, 343 (2019).

[72] Eesha Shrotiya and Shantanu Pachauri, *"Simultaneous elections and flexible legislative terms: a constitutionally preferable approach"* 5 *Indian Law Review* 111 (2021).

[73] Satrio Alif Febriyanto, Fitra Arsil and Qurrata Ayuni, "Models of Simultaneous Elections around the World: The Influence of Government Systems on Election Implementation Methods" in W Waluyo et al (eds), *Proceedings of the International Conference for Democracy and National Resilience ICDNR*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, vol 795 (2023).

democracy being a part of the unamendable basic structure of India's Constitution, an informal constitutional change is being attempted.[74]

Another adverse effect which ONOE might have on our society is the homogenisation of identities. This requires some discussion upon the inter-relation between simultaneous elections, social divisions and democracy in India. India is a country where elections and social divisions/cleavages of cross-cutting nature are critically and closely intertwined.[75] Sadly, every political party mobilises the voters on the basis of these social inequalities and differences. Currently, you see BJP using religious politics and the opposition playing caste politics. As per *Chandra*,[76] regular elections prevent the formulation of a 'master cleavage' i.e. a single narrative which trumps all the other narratives everywhere else. But, conducting simultaneous elections involves a grave risk of formulation of a master cleavage in India's plural polity. Staggered elections prevent or have the potential to prevent social divisions from consistently finding a conducive environment for overlapping and causing social unrest. In this sense, it acts as a preventive measure against politicians who exploit these divisions for their political gains by appealing to and consolidating support along specific cleavages, particularly religion.[77]

Every 'One Nation One Something' policy of the incumbent Government tends to replace unity with uniformity. Our forefathers rejected the uniform nation-state European model and sought to establish a system that harmonised democracy with deep differences. This European framework was based upon the paradigm of homogeneity, in which then national identity was dependent upon race, region, religion etc. This commitment to uniformity in Europe often had significant and violent after effects. At the eve of independence, our national leaders made a conscious choice to reject the idea of a 'Hindu Pakistan' formed upon the homogenised understanding of the society. Instead, our leaders developed a novel idea of nationhood, which promoted inclusivity, equality and fraternity, reflective of India's diverse society.[78] The structure of India's democratic process and institutes mirrored this philosophical understanding of our leaders. By enabling

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[74]   Tarunabh Khaitan, "Killing a Constitution with a Thousand Cuts: Executive Aggrandizement and Party-State Fusion in India" 14(1) *Law and Ethics of Human Rights* 49, 62 (2020).

[75]   Aejaz Ahmad Wani and Rouf Ahmad Dar, "Simultaneous Elections in Plural Societies" *Economic and Political Weekly* 4, 45, 2024.

[76]   Kanchan Chandra, 'The Ethnification of the Party System in Uttar Pradesh and Its Consequences' in Rajeev Roy and Paul Wallace (eds), *Indian Politics and the 1998 Election* 55, 55–58 (Sage 1999).

[77]   Aejaz Ahmad Wani and Rouf Ahmad Dar, "Simultaneous Elections in Plural Societies" *Economic and Political Weekly* 4, 45, 2024,3/44.

[78]   Yuvraj Surya, "One Nation, One Election: A Theoretical Critique" (Kala Prakashan, New Saket Colony, BHU, Varanasi 2025) 2.

representative democracy through elections at different levels i.e. national, regional and local, our leaders intended to suppress the secessionist forces threatening India's unity.

In this context, the proposed scheme for ONOE resembles the same homogenising and exclusionary logic of nation building, which stands in contradiction, of the foundational vision of India, lock, stock and barrel. By centralising the elections of different levels of government, ONOE risks upsetting the delicate balance which ensures that no particular identity can monopolise power by allowing every group with reasonable opportunities to express their legitimate desires through staggered elections at different levels of government.[79]

## 6. THE DIMINISHING INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY OF THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

One dimension which the authors have often found missing from all the debates surrounding the proposal of simultaneous elections is the compromising institutional integrity of the ECI in the recent times whereas, this dimension ought to form an integral part of this debate as any form of synchronized election requires an arbiter which is unimpeachably neutral.

The ECI, a fourth branch institution,[80] stands as a permanent autonomous constitutional authority and operates using Architecture, Nudge and Notice (ANN) regulations.[81] The Indian Constitution[82] vests the ECI with the power of "superintendence, direction and control" over the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections to the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the offices of the President and Vice-President. This institutional design was vital because the framers recognized the necessity of taking the matter away from the Executive authority to prevent the government of the day from vitiating free elections.[83]

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[79]   Yuvraj Surya, "One Nation, One Election: A Theoretical Critique" (Kala Prakashan, New Saket Colony, BHU, Varanasi 2025) 2.

[80]   Mark Tushnet, *The New Fourth Branch: Institutions for Protecting Constitutional Democracy* (Cambridge University Press 2021).

[81]   M. Mohsin Alam Bhat, "Governing Democracy Outside the Law: India's Election Commission and the Challenge of Accountability" 16 *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 97 (2021).

[82]   The Constitution of India, art 324.

[83]   Constituent Assembly Debates on 29 July 1947 *available at https://www.constitutiono findia.net/debates/29-july-1947/* (last visited on 3 December 2025).

However, the ECI is currently facing a credibility crisis[84] which has become more concerning post 2014 with the return of single-party dominance in India under the Modi-led BJP regime.[85] There are some evident reasons for this. The ECI's independence is structurally precarious. While Article 324 provides constitutional protections, the institution lacks full independence as the executive controls its finances and personnel appointments.[86] The appointment of the CEC and Election Commissioners (ECs) is made by the President acting on the advice of the Council of Ministers, effectively placing the selection in the hands of the Prime Minister. The practice of appointing retiring government officials has led to doubts about the impartiality of the appointees and whether they conduct themselves in a manner deemed worthy of a constitutional office.[87]

Furthermore, parity does not exist within the multi-member body[88] (where all three commissioners share equal powers) concerning tenure security. Although, CEC cannot be removed except in a manner similar to a Supreme Court judge, providing significant insulation but the ECs can be removed solely on the recommendation of the CEC.[89] This vulnerability of ECs is significant because all three members possess equal decision-making powers. The fact that ECs are "at the mercy of the political executive so far as their removal is concerned" does not bode well for the autonomy and independence of the commission.

The Supreme Court attempted to insulate the appointment process in the *Anoop Baranwal* by furthering the recommendation of the Goswami Committee on Electoral Reforms, mandating a collegium involving the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, and Chief Justice of India, until Parliament legislated on the matter. However, the Government acted with lightning speed and passed the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners Act, 2023 which restored the primacy of the executive of the ruling party by removing the CJI from this collegium. It provided for a selection committee comprised of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition, and a Cabinet Minister nominated by the Prime Minister, thereby giving an unassailable 2:1 advantage to the ruling

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[84]  "New Lokniti-CSDS survey reveals steep fall in public trust in ECI," *available at:* https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/national/new-lokniti-csds-survey-reveals-steep-fall-in-public-trust-in-eci (last visited on 2 December 2025).

[85]  Swati Jhaveri, Tarunabh Khaitan *et.al.* (eds.), *Constitutional Resilience in South Asia* 305 (Hart Publication, 2023).

[86]  Arjen Boin, Lauren A. Fahy, *et.al.* (eds.) *Guardians of Public Value: How Public Organisations become and Remain Institutions* 41 (palgrave macmilan, 2021).

[87]  Sumit Ganguly and Eswaran Sridharan (eds.), *The Oxford Handbooks of Indian Politics* 137 (Oxford Unicersity Press, 2024).

[88]  T. N. Seshan v. Union of India 1995 SCC (4) 611.

[89]  The Constitution of India art.-324.

dispensation, who inherently lacks the incentive to promote democracy if it risks their own longevity.

The legislative overruling of the *Anoop Baranwal case,* combined with the declining credibility of the ECI (an unelected institution exercising vast ANN regulatory powers) will have profound implications if the ONOE proposal is implemented in its current form. If there is a fusion between the Government and the ECI, the ONOE system enables the executive to manipulate the electoral process on a national scale in order to get a favourable result. This concern is not unfounded. The allegation of systemic vote manipulation and misconduct of the 2019, 2024 Lok Sabha elections and the Maharashtra Assembly elections of November 2024, along with the recent Special Intensive Revision 'SIR' exercise in Bihar[90] and now in the whole country[91] have all dented the image of the ECI. Moreover, the failure of ECI to act swiftly against a flurry of violations[92] and to respond to deepfakes, misleading media and communal content[93] has also added substance to this criticism.

## 7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR VS. ARGUMENTS AGAINST ONOE

| Dimension | Arguments in Favour of ONOE | Arguments Against ONOE |
|---|---|---|
| *Financial Implications* | Conducting frequent elections is a massive drain on the exchequer. Synchronizing them would significantly reduce the recurring expenditure on logistics, security, and administrative machinery, allowing funds to be diverted to development projects. | The "cost" argument is overstated (approx. 0.02% of the budget) compared to the value of democratic accountability. The real financial burden is opaque political party spending, not ECI expenditure. State funding of elections is a better alternative than suppressing elections. |

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[90] Vote for Democracy, "Report on the Dysfunctional Election Commission of India & Weaponisation of India's Election System *available at:* https://votefordemocracy.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Final-250814-Dysfunctional-ECI-Mtra-Bihar-Report.pdf.

[91] Special Intensive Revision (SIR) Phase-II begins in 9 States and 3 UTs *available at:* https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2186480&reg=3&lang=2.

[92] The 2024 Lok Sabha Election is a Tale of Egregious Errors and Wanton Violations *available at:* https://thewire.in/politics/the-2024-lok-sabha-election-is-a-tale-of-egregious-errors-and-wanton-violations.

[93] #FreeAndFair: Late to the Party(s): How ECI dragged its feet in the 2024 General Election *available at:*https://internetfreedom.in/ eci-actions-in-the-2024-general-election/.

| Dimension | Arguments in Favour of ONOE | Arguments Against ONOE |
|---|---|---|
| *Governance & Administration* | Frequent elections lead to a perpetual "campaign mode," causing "policy paralysis" due to the imposition of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). ONOE ensures a stable five-year window for the government to focus on governance. | Staggered elections act as a "safety valve," allowing voters to provide regular feedback to the government. The MCC only stops *new* announcements, not ongoing work; it prevents the misuse of state machinery by incumbents, which is vital for a level playing field. |
| *Federal Structure* | It promotes a unified national outlook and strengthens the social fabric by reducing the frequency of divisive election campaigns.[6] | It risks creating a "Master Cleavage" where national issues overshadow local/regional concerns. It forces a unitary timeline on states, undermining their legislative autonomy and the "holding together" model of Indian federalism.[4] |
| *Political Equity* | Voting for both the Lok Sabha and State Assembly simultaneously is more convenient for voters and may potentially increase voter turnout.[9] | Empirical evidence suggests simultaneous polls favour national parties with deep pockets. Regional narratives get drowned out, reducing the political diversity essential for India's plural polity. |
| *Operational Feasibility* | Reduces the prolonged deployment of security forces and teachers (polling staff), freeing them for their primary duties. | Requires a massive, simultaneous deployment of EVMs and VVPATs. If the ECI's integrity is compromised, a flawed simultaneous election delegitimizes the entire democratic mandate for five years without a localized corrective mechanism. |

Another crucial aspect, ought to be mentioned here, is that in the current electoral system staggered state elections acts as a *safety net* i.e. if the ECI mismanages an election in one state for example, due to poor scheduling or booth capturing etc, the democratic damage is localized to that particular state. This enables the ECI to learn, take corrective actions and ensure the legitimacy of elections is not compromised in the next election. But, under ONOE scheme, the election is a singular *all or nothing* event. If there is electoral mismanagement on the part of the ECI then the failure is total. There is no feedback loop or corrective mechanism for five years. The ECI becomes a "single point of failure" for the entire democratic system.

## 8. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The need for electoral reforms due to rampant corrupt practices during elections has been recognised for long. But, is ONOE the *panacea* for all of it? In the end, everything comes down to two questions- *firstly*, when ordinary pills can do, why go for a surgery? And *secondly,* do we want the most equitable democracy or the least expensive democracy? The argument of saving public fund might be partly true but any inclusive and participatory form of political structure will necessarily

involve a substantial cost. So, the question is- Should we not focus on cutting the overall expenditure involved in an election? Because, most of the candidates and parties spend an exorbitant amount of money on elections. The recent 2024 General Election was the costliest election in the history.[94] Another crucial but ignored aspect is the absence of spending limit on political parties which spend a ridiculous amount of money to influence voters by handing out cash, food, alcohol etc.[95] The ECI should focus on introducing a ceiling on party expenditure just like there is a cap on maximum expenditure by an individual candidate. Thus, the focus should be on saving money by regulating excessive spending by effectively monitoring and limiting the excessive expenditure.

A viable alternative to the current model of electoral funding is the state funding of elections. This model, which was also discussed in the Constituent Assembly,[96] provides that the State must bear the expenses of an election. This practice, in one form or the other, is already well established across the democratic world.[97] This paper argues for implementing the recommendations of the Indrajit Gupta Committee on state funding of elections. The committee, recommended that initially, state should provide partial assistance to recognized political parties by providing services and gradually, more and more of their expenses in campaigning can be absorbed and be distributed through a separate, transparent, auditable Election Fund.[98] These services may extend from provision of free airtime on state and private media for recognized parties, supply of fuel for campaign vehicles and printing materials for voter slips to government-designated spaces for rallies to reduce logistical costs. This would level the playing field for smaller regional parties and reduce the reliance on illicit corporate funding/black money, addressing the root cause of high costs more effectively than ONOE.

Another often-cited potential benefit of ONOE is that it addresses the issue of Governance paralysis due to MCC. However, this is in direct contradiction of the recommendation of the Law Commission itself, which stated that MCC cannot be blamed for complete administrative paralysis.[99] However, it will be better if the Election Commission (EC) takes active steps for improving the MCC guidelines

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[94] Bansy Kalappa, "The Spiraling Cost of Democracy: India's Election Expenses Hit New Heights" *The New Indian Express*, 2024.

[95] Chaudhary A and Rodrigues J, "Why India's Election Is Among the World's Most Expensive" *The Economic Times*, 2024.

[96] Namit Oberoi, "*Reforming Election Funding*" 1 *NUJS Law Review* 143 (2008).

[97] *Ibid*.

[98] Government of India, "Report of the Committee on State Funding of Elections" Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs 1998).

[99] Law Commission of India, "255th Report on Simultaneous Elections" 12 (2018).

in consultation with different stakeholders[100] as well for ensuring effective implementation of the MCC which is routinely violated.[101] Moreover, the ECI should leverage technology to reduce the election cycle thereby, minimizing the period of administrative freeze.

Moreover, the Institutional Crisis of the Election Commission of India (ECI) renders the implementation of ONOE perilously premature. The legitimacy of any synchronized election depends entirely on the unimpeachable neutrality of the arbiter. However, the legislative overruling of *Anoop Baranwal* has institutionalized a structural vulnerability. To restore public faith in the electoral process, Parliament must revisit the *Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023*. The selection panel for the CEC and ECs should be reconstituted to include the Chief Justice of India, as mandated by the Supreme Court in *Anoop Baranwal*. This ensures that the umpire is chosen by a bipartisan consensus rather than executive fiat.

As far as the argument that ONOE violates the basic structure of the Indian Constitution is concerned, the author thinks that coming to any conclusion at this stage would be jumping the gun as its impact on the basic structure can only be analysed once the Parliament actually passes the Constitutional Amendment Bill and gives it a defined structure. But, the fallacy in the argument that the administrative benefits of synchronising elections outweigh the adverse impact which it may have on federal and democratic principles is for everyone to see.

India's democratic system is praised for its ability to uphold diversity, support inclusivity, and ensure accountability. The trio of diversity, inclusivity, and accountability is the foundation of India's identity and governance. The strength of Indian democracy is not in uniformity but in its ability to harmonise differences and empower the marginalized. The path forward must therefore tread carefully, balancing the need for reform with an unwavering commitment to preserving the democratic and federal fabric of the nation. Only through such prudence can India ensure that its democracy remains vibrant, inclusive, and resilient in the face of evolving challenges.

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[100]  Jha MK, "One Nation, One Election Undermines the Voter and Indian Democracy" *The Indian Express*, 2024.

[101]  Tejasi Panjiar, "How ECI Dragged Its Feet in the 2024 General Election", *Internet Freedom Foundation* (2024)